



TRANSCENDING BORDERS: TRANSCULTURAL IDENTITY FORMATION IN JASMINE DAYS BY BENYAMIN

Deepa P.S

Assistant Professor, Post Graduate Department of English, Naipunnya School of Management, Cherthala, Kerala

ABSTRACT

Transculturalism is a new sphere of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures: ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, sexual and professional. It is a contemporary theory of culture that transcends the constraints of conventional conception of culture. Transculturalism is emerging in various fields of literary studies, films, theatre, architecture, music and anthropology. It is characterized by cross cultural convolutions, leading to the formulation of a novel cosmopolitan culture. Transculturalism acts as a unifying force of cultural diversity. Transculture overcomes the isolation of their symbolic systems and value determinations and broadens the field of "supra-cultural creativity". We acquire transculture at the boundaries of our own culture and at the crossroads with other cultures through the risky experiences of our own cultural wanderings and transgressions. It gives freedom from one's own culture in which one was born and educated. The article provides a close reading of the text *Jasmine Days* by Benyamin in the light of transcultural theory and aims to show how the amalgamation of different cultures results in a kind of metamorphosis, creating a third space where an individual acquires a transcultural identity. Also from the analysis, it becomes clear that this transformation is not a regressive one but a progressive one.

KEYWORDS: Transculturalism, Culture, Self, Identity, Globalization, Freedom, Breaking boundaries.

INTRODUCTION

Transculturalism is a new sphere of cultural development that transcends the borders of traditional cultures: ethnic, national, racial, religious, gender, sexual and professional. It is a contemporary theory of culture that transcends the constraints of conventional conception of culture. Transculturalism is emerging in various fields of literary studies, films, theatre, architecture, music and anthropology. It is characterized by cross cultural associations, fusions and convolutions, leading to the formulation of a novel cosmopolitan culture. Transculturalism acts as a unifying force of cultural diversity. Transculture overcomes the isolation of their symbolic systems and value determinations and broadens the field of 'supra-cultural creativity'. We acquire transculture at the boundaries of our own culture and at the crossroads with other cultures through the risky experiences of our own cultural wanderings and transgressions. It gives freedom from one's own culture in which one was born and educated.

In his *Ethics of Identity*, Kwame Anthony Appiah defines a cosmopolitan as "someone who thinks that the world is, so to speak, our shared hometown, reproducing something very like the self-conscious oxymoron of the 'global village'" (Appiah 217). What transculturalism offers is a breaking down of cultural boundaries, not their re-enforcement. We no longer speak of integration of a minority culture into the mainstream, but of an interweaving of all cultural identities present in a nation-state. Embracing some of the cultural specifics of different ethnicities, fostering the 'Other' and "recognizing oneself in the other" (Cuccioletta 9) is, in Donald Cuccioletta's opinion the recipe to building a cosmopolitan citizenship.

The text under consideration is *Jasmine Days* by Benyamin. *Jasmine Days* is a Malayalam novel by Benyamin and translated into English by Shahnaz Habib. First published in 2014, the novel won the JCB Prize for literature. The novel portrays the life of a young Pakistani woman named Sameera, a radio jockey working in an unnamed Middle Eastern Country. Being an

outsider, Sameera finds it difficult to belong to the City. However, her friendship with Ali, a native of the City, brings about major changes in Sameera as an individual.

The novel traces Sameera's transition from a naïve young woman to a more matured and developed individual. Her friendship with Ali helps her to understand more about the people and the history of the foreign land. Sameera experiences different cultural conflicts being a migrant. However, it is the same that inspires her to understand more about her own identity. Her desire to understand about the people of this foreign land helps her to sympathize with them. It is this knowledge that helps her to take an objective stand and in turn provided her with a wider perspective in life.

The article provides a close reading of the text *Jasmine Days* in the light of transcultural theory and aims to show how the amalgamation of different cultures results in a kind of metamorphosis, creating a third space where an individual acquires a transcultural identity. Also from the analysis, it becomes clear that this transformation is not a regressive one but a progressive one.

Transculturalism: Creating a New Paradigm

Transculturalism can be defined as "seeing yourself in others." Transculturalism aligns itself with human equality above and beyond superficial differences, whether of epistemological or ontological origins. Instead of depending on the learned stereotypes we hold of the other, transculturalism wants us to be mindful and engage common sense, rationality and empathy in dealing with other people. Transculturation reflects the natural tendency of people to resolve conflicts over time, rather than exacerbating them. In a general sense, transculturation covers war, ethnic conflict, racism, multiculturalism, cross-culturalism, interracial marriage and any other of a number of contexts that deal with more than one culture.

Fernando Ortiz, a Cuban anthropologist was the first scholar to acknowledge the importance of the processes of transculturation

in his book *Cuban Counterpoint*, initially published in Spanish in 1940. Ortiz was interested in analyzing the ability of the so-called "peripheral" cultures to create cultural fusions through the meeting and intermingling with newly acquired elements instead of simply and passively assimilating the cultures of more powerful, domineering nations. Ortiz defined transculturalism as a synthesis of two phases occurring simultaneously, one being a de-culturalization of the past with a 'mstisag' with the present. 'Mstisag' refers to cultural and racial hybridization. This new reinventing of the new common culture is therefore based on the meeting and the intermingling of the different peoples and cultures.

According to Ortiz, the word transculturation expresses the different phases of the processes of transition from one culture to another because this does not consist merely in acquiring another culture, which is what the English word acculturation really implies, but the process also necessarily involves uprooting the previous culture which could be defined as deculturation. In addition, it carries the idea of conquest - creation of new cultural phenomena which could be called neoculturation. Every change of culture, every transculturation is a process in which something is always given in return for what one receives: a system of give and take. It is a process in which both parts of the equation are modified, a process from which a new reality emerges, transformed and complex, a reality that is not a mechanical agglomeration of traits, nor even a mosaic, but a new phenomenon, original and independent. The word transculturation, stemming from Latin roots, provides us with a term that does not contain the implication of one certain culture toward which other must tend, but an exchange between two cultures, both of them active, both contributing their share and both co-operating to bring about a new reality of civilization.

Mikhail Bakhtin formulated one of the principal concepts of culturology as "outsideness," "being beyond," or "exotopy". In order to understand, it is immensely important for the person who understands to be located outside the object of his or her creative understanding such as in time, space, in culture etc. In the realm of culture, outsideness is a most powerful factor in understanding. This principle suggests that we can adequately understand and describe a certain culture only if we distance ourselves from it, that is, transcend its boundaries. Moreover, Bakhtin suggests that the essence of a given culture may be penetrated from the viewpoint of another foreign culture better than from its own inner perspective. It is only in the eyes of another culture that foreign culture reveals itself fully and profoundly. In the same way, a description of Soviet culture involves the act of self withdrawal from it, which presumes an exit into trans- Soviet cultural space. Since any direct political opposition was impossible in a totalitarian state like the Soviet Union used to be, culturology became a kind of cultural transposition, a mode of positioning oneself beyond rather than against the dominating culture. The aim was not to fight the political regime but to transcend the boundaries of the given culture by positing it as one among many historical and imaginable cultures and moving toward the horizon of all such possibilities.

The principle of exotopy, or extralocality is applicable to any culture and in fact to any object of study or reflection. By increasing our awareness of it, we distance ourselves from it. Exotopicality should be considered as important a property of thinking as intentionality, the concept posited in phenomenology by Edmund Husserl. He claimed that any act of consciousness is "intentional," in other words, is directed toward something that is located outside of consciousness.

Consequently, Mikhail Bakhtin, looking at the same principle from another side, assumed that consciousness is "exotopical" in relation to its object. "Aboutness" and "beyondness" of consciousness and intentionally and extopicality, are mutually connected. If consciousness has its object outside itself, then consciousness itself is external to its object.

Transculture is the next level of liberation, this time from unconscious symbolic dependencies, predispositions; prejudices of the "native," "natural" culture. (Epstein 343) As indicated by Mikhail Bakhtin, in order to reach this transcultural dimension or "special mode of existence", one needs to undergo a process of physical/spatial/imaginary deterritorialization, transnational movement, linguistic misappropriation, cultural displacement that is a physical, emotional detachment from one's own primordial culture, territory, roots as well as intellectual misalignment from one's own national/ethnic 'collective' fatherland.

As stated by Welsch in his *Transculturality*, transculturalism offers a unique answer to the fear of homogenization. He argues that his understanding of transculturality does not destroy diversification, but rather modifies it in specific ways:

According to Jeff Lewis, transculturalism is characterized by cultural fluidity and the dynamics of cultural change. Whether by conflict, necessity, revolution or the slow progress of interaction, different groups share their stories, symbols, values, meanings and experiences. This process of sharing and perpetual 'beaching' releases the solidity and stability of culture, creating the condition for transfer and transition. Transculturalism allows human individuals and groups to adapt and adopt new discourses, values, ideas, and knowledge systems. It acknowledges that culture is always in a state of flux, and always seeking new terrains of knowing and being. This process of sharing and perpetual 'beaching' releases the solidity and stability of culture, creating the condition for transfer and transition.

Jasmine Days is a 2014 Malayalam novel by Benyamin and is translated into English by Shahnaz Habib. The novel tells the story of Sameera Parvin, a young Pakistani woman who moves to an unnamed Middle Eastern city to live with her father and her relatives. Benyamin's protagonist, Sameera can be seen as a perfect example of transcultural identity. Sameera spent majority of her life in Pakistan with no exposure to the outside world but once she moves to a new foreign land she experiences a total transformation. Her life in the new land changes her perspective and helps her overcome her prejudices.

Sameera's friendship with the natives of the land provides her with an insight into their problems. Unlike her family members who refuses to change their age old beliefs, Sameera remains open to new changes. The novel traces Sameera's transition from a naïve young woman to a more matured and developed individual. Her friendship with a native named Ali helps her understand more about the people and history of this foreign land. Being a migrant, Sameera experiences different cultural conflicts, however, it is the same that inspires her to understand more about her own identity. She becomes capable of identifying the "other" as herself. It is this knowledge that helps her to take an objective stand and provided her with a wider perspective in life, thereby forming for her a transcultural identity.

Sameera takes up a job as a radio jockey in the new foreign land. Initially she finds it uncomfortable to work along with people belonging to different nations, especially Indians. She always

saw the Indians as her enemy and even thought of quitting the job because of this reason. But soon Sameera began to belong in the studio and even started looking forward to every day and every moment she spent there.

Sameera's friendship with Ali, who is a native, brings about major changes in her. Ali was a technical staff at the radio station. He spoke a hybrid language that mixed Arabic, Hindi and English. It is Ali who introduces Sameera to String Walkers, a group of musicians who played rock 'n' roll in the same spirit as Arab music. Sameera and Ali's tryst with the music soon transports them to topics of freedom and identity, revealing the inner struggles of the native and the outsider.

Sameera's friendship with Ali makes her aware of the never ending Shia-Sunni conflict. Ali belongs to the Shia community and is called a second class citizen. Ali, being a Shia, was deprived of citizenship in his own country. His community has been suffering this discrimination for ages and he labels it as the "curse of not belonging to the ruling majority" (63). Even though they are the original people of the land, they are being subjected to numerous injustices. It was only in 1717, when the Omani clan started taking over, that the Sunnis started dominating this country. "We, who have lived here from time immemorial, have become second-class citizens while those who came after us have become rulers. Why should we accept this?" (92)

Sameera also learns about the tragic condition of Ali's family. Ali lost his father at a very young age. For no specific reason the police one day arrested Ali's father and tortured him for days. After the brutal harassment of the police, Ali's father was moved to a secret underground cell. For years Ali's mother waited for his father's arrival. Even now she continues waiting for him.

In the meantime, the city was also witnessing a Revolution as the Sunnis started voicing their protest. In addition to this, Sameera's family comes to know about her relationship with Ali. The problem was not that she befriended a young man but was his Shia identity. "That's when I realized that Shias were not just second - class citizens in the City, they were kafirs to be detested like hell" (72). Sameera, being aware of Ali's plight is able to view him beyond his Shia identity. She does not view him as a Second-class citizen as others. Instead of merely labeling him as a rebel, she tries to understand what causes him to rebel. For Sameera's family, Ali is someone who has to be detested and asks Sameera to do the same. Sameera now is in a dilemma as she cannot fully support Ali nor she is able to support her family's beliefs. Sameera now becomes torn between the two views and questions herself. According to Sameera's family; Ali is a Hezbollah, a killer dog. After migrating to the City, Sameera undergoes a kind of metamorphosis which changes her old beliefs and prejudices. The clash of her old beliefs and the new one provides her with a third constructive space which is more progressive in nature. She attains a transcultural identity and is able to perceive things from a different point of view. However, Sameera's family members retain their old beliefs and are not adaptable to the changes. Even though they have been staying in the City for years, they could not change their age old beliefs and ultimately this itself leads to their doom.

Sameera's understanding about Ali's history begins to change the way she views the things happening around her. Her life in the City exposes her to various cultural conflicts. This leads to the formation of new beliefs which are unbiased in nature, thereby becoming a transcultural identity. Sameera begins to question the beliefs that were taught by her family. She no longer remains

a slave to the age old beliefs. In the midst of the Revolution, Sameera loses her father who had been on duty for the Majesty. Sameera becomes shattered when she realizes that Ali was responsible for her father's death. At first Sameera is not able to forgive Ali for such a ruthless act. But eventually she reasons it out as Ali was not aware that it was her father. If Ali knew that he was Sameera's father he would never have done that. Sameera's meeting with Ali's uncle again helps her to bear with her father's loss. He says, "up until that scene, your father was the attacking vulture and Ali was the hare. But the moment your baba lost his gun, he turned into a hare and Ali became the vulture." (234)

Sameera finally decides to forgive Ali. By the end of the novel a total transformation takes place in Sameera. In the beginning of the novel, Sameera was a naïve young woman who was not aware of anything that happened around her. After migrating to the City, initially she found it an alien experience but as she mingled with people belonging to different cultures, religion and nations she begins to think beyond her age old beliefs. Sameera realizes that national borders, religion, ethnicity do not matter and what matters the most is humanity. Sameera starts to view people irrespective of their national or religious identity. The clash of the old and new beliefs and cultures leads to a metamorphosis in Sameera. This has helped in molding a new individual with a much broader perspective hence giving her a transcultural identity. This clash of cultures created a third constructive space which is devoid of any prejudices or biased beliefs and has enabled Sameera to have an objective perspective.

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